

Federal judge blocks Texas voter ID law

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A Corpus Christi-based federal judge on Thursday blocked Texas from enforcing voter ID requirements just weeks ahead of the November elections, knocking down a law that the U.S. Justice Department condemned in court as the state's latest means of suppressing minority turnout.

The injunction issued by U.S. District Judge Nelva Gonzales Ramos of Corpus Christi is a defeat for Republican-backed photo ID measures that have swept across the U.S. in recent years and mostly been upheld in court.

However, the U.S. Supreme Court on Thursday night blocked Wisconsin from implementing a law requiring voters to present photo IDs.

Republican Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott's office said it would appeal the injunction.

"The State of Texas will immediately appeal and will urge the Fifth Circuit to resolve this matter quickly to avoid voter confusion in the upcoming election," said Lauren Bean, a spokeswoman for Abbott's office.

Early voting is scheduled to begin Oct. 20.

Gonzales Ramos, an appointee of President Barack Obama, never signaled during a two-week trial in September that she intended to rule on the Texas law before Election Day. But the timing could spare an estimated 13.6 million registered Texas voters from needing one of seven kinds of photos identification to cast a ballot.

The Justice Department says more than 600,000 of those voters, mostly blacks and Hispanics, currently lack any eligible ID to vote.

Gonzales Ramos' ruling says the law "creates an unconstitutional burden on the right to vote, has an impermissible discriminatory effect against Hispanics and African-Americans, and was imposed with an unconstitutional discriminatory purpose."

The measure "constitutes an unconstitutional poll tax," she said.

Sherrilyn Ifill, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said, "The Court today effectively ruled that racial discrimination simply cannot spread to the ballot box."

Nineteen states have laws requiring voters to show identification at the polls. Courts across the country have knocked down challenges — including at the U.S. Supreme Court — but the Texas case attracted unusual attention from U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder.

He brought the weight of his office into Texas after the Supreme Court last year struck down the heart of the Voting Rights Act, which had prohibited the state from enacting its voter ID law signed by Republican Gov. Rick Perry in 2011. Democrats and minority rights groups joined the Justice Department in the lawsuit.

The full Voting Rights Act had blocked Texas and eight other states with histories of discrimination from changing election laws without permission from the DOJ or a federal court. Holder vowed to wring whatever protections he could from the new and weakened version, and made Texas a first target.

But prevailing in court required proving intentional discrimination, and Texas maintained that opponents produced no evidence.

The office of Abbott, who is favored to win the race to replace Perry as governor, said minorities and whites alike supported the law in public opinion polls. It also pointed to other states, such as Georgia and Indiana, where the similar measures have been upheld.

But opponents slammed Texas' law as far more discriminatory. College students IDs aren't accepted by poll workers, but concealed handgun licenses are. Free voting IDs offered by the state require a birth certificate that costs little as \$3, but the Justice Department argued that traveling to get those documents imposes an outsize burden on poor minorities.

As a result, opponents say, Texas has issued fewer than 300 free voter IDs since the law took effect. Georgia, meanwhile, has issued 2,200 voter IDs under a similar program with more robust outreach.

Texas has already conducted two smaller statewide elections under voter ID, in which no widespread issues were reported.

Ramos heard evidence in a federal lawsuit styled *Marc Veasey, et al, vs. Rick Perry, et al*, in which U.S. Department of Justice attorneys and minority voters claim the Texas voter ID violates the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The plaintiffs argue the law was designed not to combat voter fraud but to neutralize the voting strength of Texas' growing minority population.